



Peace Ways AGLI

I AM MY NEIGHBOR'S MIRROR:



A COMMUNITY REBUILDING
AFTER GENOCIDE

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Introduction

“1994 was beyond our imagination,” says “Jean,” a resident of Nyamata, a community in Rwanda that was particularly devastated by the 1994 genocide. A moderate Hutu married to a Tutsi, “Jean”, who will remain anonymous, spent those 100 bloody days in 1994 bribing the Hutu militia to keep his family and other Tutsi community members safe. “They killed people like I cannot tell. Tutsis. Hutus who did not support the killings. Children. Parents. Even old people were killed and the country was destroyed. You felt as though you were the only person [left] in the country. It is a miracle that there were survivors.... People wondered why they were still alive. They would have been better off dying.”

Now, the killers are coming home. Almost a hundred thousand men, boys and some women were imprisoned after the genocide by the new government. The justice system is overloaded, the prisons are over crowded, and most have waited for 7 or 8 years in prison with no trial. In a bold and innovative effort to accelerate the transitional justice and reconciliation process, the government of Rwanda has reinstated a traditional community justice process called Gacaca, literally meaning “on the grass” to try lesser crimes of the genocide. The masterminds appear either at the international tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania or the legal courts of Rwanda, but many of those who participated in killing, and many who killed multiple people, are appearing before community tribunals designed to integrate perpetrators back into their neighborhoods. In 2003 and again in 2005, the Rwandan government released tens of thousands of prisoners who confessed to murder, theft and vandalism. Now these released prisoners are back in their communities, waiting to appear before Gacaca. Some will be sent back to jail, some will pay reparations in money or labor, others will be considered to have served their sentences, and still others will be exonerated as neighbors admit to having

falsely accused them in the painful rage and despair of the genocide’s aftermath.

In Nyamata, the proximity between killer and survivor is breath taking. People pass each other on the dusty red roads and avoid eye contact. They brush against each other in the market, and are careful who they buy from. The fear is palpable. It lives and breathes; it builds literal fences between neighbors; it cakes on to tongues and shoes like the red dust, thirsty for rain.

Is it the Quaker notion that there is that of God in each of us that gives the Friends here such gall? Is it that unwavering hope that even a man who has butchered and hated and thieved can be redeemed? Or is it simply a thirst that comes out of raw hurt, to find each other again? Whatever it is, Rwandan Evangelical Friends, through Friends Peace House, are doing something that very few other groups in Rwanda have tried. They are bringing killers and survivors together. They are inviting them to sit down and look each other in the eye.

Nyamata’s Story

“I have been here since 1973,” says Jean. “I was a student at secondary school. Then Nyamata was a very good and rich place with a lot of farmers and crops that could help the country. There was security. We used to live 9 km from school and could come and go with no problems. You could go to any house to eat and sleep. This was a good place to live.”

A genocide widow, “Sarah” is the leader of an association of widows in Nyamata. Her memories are similar:

As citizens of Nyamata we were together. We were digging [cultivating the land] for each other. If someone was sick, they took him to the hospital. The problem was the government. We [Tutsis] couldn’t go to the



schools. If you were rich, you could go to private schools. But when the war broke out things changed because of tribalism.

– “Sarah”, genocide survivor

Although many community members remember the 1970s and 1980s with nostalgia, Nyamata has a long history of violence. In 1959, many Tutsi were relocated to Nyamata in an effort to concentrate the population. Thus, unlike most other communities in Rwanda, Tutsi in Nyamata were in the slight majority at the time of the genocide, in spite of several massacres targeting the Tutsi population in the 1960s. According to the director of Nyamata’s two genocide memorial sites, between two and three thousand Tutsi were killed there in 1963. In 1966, between 10 and 15,000 were killed. In 1992, 486 people were killed in three days.

Although discrimination and violence against Tutsis had been enacted for years, preventing many, if not all Tutsi from advancing to secondary school, divisive propaganda began in earnest in 1990.

In 1990 many [political] parties came [to Nyamata] and many conflicts started. They started teaching segregation and tribalism. Students who were in school together were taught that there were two tribes, and the political parties supported this tribalism.

- “Jean”, Hutu Moderate

In 1992, this place had many problems because they started training Hutus. They had secret meetings. We could see them running, training, but we didn’t know their intention. In 1992, they started killing Tutsis, but people didn’t understand so they took refuge together with Hutus. When the president died [in April, 1994], they had already been training for two years.

– “Sarah”, genocide survivor

In 1994, before the genocide, the director of the memorial sites estimates that there were 120,000 inhabitants of Nyamata, more than 70,000 of whom were Tutsi. Between April and July, in less than 100 days all but 2000 Tutsi community members were killed.

In 1959, this place was a place where they brought many Tutsis from other places to here. That’s why the majority were Tutsis. They wanted them all in one place. The genocide was done by soldiers who were well trained. If it were civilians to civilians,

they wouldn’t have been able to do it. When the genocide started, many Hutus were afraid to come to kill so many strong Tutsis, [so] they used soldiers to support them. First the soldiers shot them, execution [style]. Second, the interahamwe came to finish them [anyone left alive] by cutting them. After killing people, they could take all their property. That’s how they could kill. There were many intermarriages and mixed families, so it was not easy to convince people to kill each other, but they did because of material gain.... We had two months of killing with no rescuing. – “Jean”

The genocide and war brought a massive population upheaval. As the Tutsi rebel army, the RPF, advanced through Rwanda, they stopped the genocide. Afraid of revenge killings, almost the entire Hutu population fled. “Sarah,” a survivor tells the story of what happened in Nyamata in the immediate aftermath of the genocide:

Immediately after the war and genocide, people moved by foot to Congo. Many died on the way, others died of cholera. I stayed in the house. I was pregnant and starving. There were some [survivors] who were still in the pits [with the dead]. [RPF] soldiers brought them and put them together in old schools and camps. There were no houses, people were starving and many died of cholera.

Hutus had fled their houses and property, and survivors had no where to stay [because their houses had been burned] so they used the houses of the Hutus and used the Hutus’ gardens and farms. When the refugees came back, the government forced the Tutsis to leave the houses and many survivors were angry. They thought the government was favoring the murderers. Now they don’t want to pray together.

This all brought a big hatred and people started to falsely accuse people without even knowing what really happened. People were put in prison, and houses were built for survivors so now they have somewhere to stay.

Many people had been wounded, amputated, lost limbs. Those who were surviving without wounds were looking for

Hutus to kill, though the government never supported them, they saw their people dying in the hospitals and they wanted revenge.

Many old women, who lost their husbands and all their children, committed suicide. There was a woman who gave a cow to a soldier to kill her. He didn't do it, but she had wanted to pay him. This still happens now. Old women who have to go fetch water and can't, they still want to commit suicide.

Today, after 5 to 10 years in prison, people who have confessed to crimes of genocide are coming back to Nyamata, moving back onto their land, back into their houses and back into their families. This is reviving old hatreds and exhuming buried fears. "Among all Hutus," says a genocide survivor, before the Friends Peace House's intervention, "there are no men who have done well. They all have done bad. Almost every one has killed – the whole race of Hutus, almost every one has killed."

This survivor goes on to report that returning prisoners have threatened survivors:

Today Nyamata has widows and orphans, sickness and poverty. It is bad. It's bad to see people who killed your family come back. The [released] prisoners are still mean. There are many liars. If you have killed, you will kill again. They threaten to kill again. They say, "We're used to prison, we'll kill you again and go back to prison."
– genocide survivor

Sometimes released prisoners themselves are harassed either by angry survivors or by perpetrators who are afraid of being exposed in Gacaca. Rather than face Gacaca, some have fled to neighboring Burundi and Congo. Other witnesses are intimidated and flee to avoid repercussions. Those who stay encounter a plethora of land and community conflicts:

We fear each other after the war. There were refugees in 1959. There were refugees after the genocide. There are the prisoners. There are the survivors. Now they have all come back together. There is a big problem with land. People come back to find their houses have been destroyed. Prisoners have nothing. The government is trying to make them share the land. – released prisoner

We have many widows and orphans. We have prisoners coming back and there is no trust among them. We don't trust prisoners and we don't trust ourselves even.... We might invite them to a party, but they are afraid to come. With plots of land, they say that they don't want to be neighbors.... We are afraid that when they see you without children and husbands, they feel complex in the heart. – genocide survivor

There is sorrow inside our hearts. There is poverty.... People have died of hunger. In 2000, I saw someone selling his own roof and doors to get something to eat.... People are disabled, they have lost limbs. I have a neighbor who is a widow. Eleven of her children were killed. She is completely alone and traumatized. Although she is born again, she cries often. The genocide [is impossible to] imagine. I don't know where to start and where to end. – Hutu Moderate

The Alternatives to Violence Project

With support from the Drane Family Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and the African Great Lakes Initiative of the Friends Peace Teams, the Rwandan Friends Peace House (FPH) initiated a program in Nyamata to help reintegrate released prisoners back into the community. Using a model called the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), FPH conducted 20 workshops, with most workshops bringing together 10 survivors of the genocide with 10 released prisoners.

The AVP model uses a series of workshops to build a strong sense of community, to help participants analyze root causes of conflict, to introduce practical skills and principles for resolving conflicts non-violently, and to promote participative decision-making. Participants were identified and invited by community leaders – government officials, church pastors, and leaders of associations who all worked closely with Friends Peace House to ensure that each workshop had a balance of released prisoners and survivors. Occasionally those who were neither perpetrators nor survivors would also be included, in order to reach a broader cross-section of the Nyamata community. Well-trained and experienced AVP facilitators were also carefully selected to represent a mix of identities and balance of genders. In all, almost 400 people participated in AVP in Nyamata.



The evaluation, the findings of which are included here, involved a pre-intervention series of interviews and focus groups, and post-intervention data collection process. In order to gain entry to the community and encourage interviewees' candor, we conducted two AVP workshops before beginning the pre-intervention evaluation. This gave Friends Peace House credibility, and earned the cooperation of community leaders and others. After the completion of all twenty workshops, a Friends Peace House consultant formed two focus groups, one of survivors with a Tutsi translator, and one of released prisoners, with a Hutu translator. In order to give further validity to the findings, the consultant and translator promised anonymity to all interviewees, and did not rely solely on general statements, but rather continued to seek concrete examples of AVP's short and mid-term impact on the community of Nyamata. While past evaluations have looked at personal transformation, questions for this evaluation focused on community change and sought to identify tangible shifts in community interactions and systems of mutual support. For survival and the sake of superficial harmony, many people in Rwanda are highly skilled in hiding their true attitudes. Thus, these findings in no way claim that negative feelings or residual hatreds have been eradicated as a result of Friends Peace House's intervention. Rather, these findings offer a glimpse into what might be; they offer a few powerful examples of people, in spite of all that is churning inside, reaching across an unimaginable chasm to plant hope; they are a beginning, not an end result; but they are small miracles nonetheless.

It's not easy to find people who believe in God after what happened. You can't teach in the morning and get results in the evening. But slowly, little by little we'll have a great movement because AVP touches at the heart

of what happened. Even people who killed, survivors, even leaders – we all have problems in our hearts. The medicine is talking to one another and that is what AVP does.... People will be transformed. They will help other people. After they've transformed we shall see it and they will be examples for others. Even the government will see it. Even in Gacaca they'll know it. People will get up and speak truth. We have already starting talking about this program in our villages. People are asking us, "What is AVP? Where does it come from?" You will see the results. And if you find that your harvest is not enough, you will continue.

– "Jean"

I Am My Neighbor's Mirror

"You see, you are like a mirror," said one released prisoner. "People find themselves in us, so if they see that you are telling the truth, they trust you." Perpetrators and survivors of Rwanda are profoundly intertwined. Their pain, their healing, their safety, their freedom, their knowing, are enmeshed. They are neighbors and brothers, cousins and classmates. Some see genocide as an extreme result of psychological projection: when one group projects all that is hated about itself onto another group, the target group comes to represent all that is bad and shameful and evil about ourselves. Then it becomes not only possible but necessary to exterminate. Is it possible that by instilling in its participants a sense of their own power, and a pride in their own goodness, a simple community workshop can begin to reverse this powerful psychological dynamic? Stories from both sides – from perpetrators and survivors alike – suggest that it is.

Responsibility

“The Rwandan people,” said one interviewee, “they respond so much to the government. If you lead them badly, they become bad people. If you lead them well, it is good.” Indeed, Rwanda has historically placed an enormous responsibility on its governments. Many Rwandans as well as foreign anthropologists and political scientists have noted the deference that Rwanda has for its authorities. This has been a partial explanation for the apparent ease with which the Hutu Power regime was able to convince Rwandans to kill their own neighbors and family members. And the paradigm has not shifted dramatically after the genocide. Now, many Rwandans seem to put all hope for reconciliation in the hands of government. “We live together,” said one survivor. “Reconciliation is possible in the government. But in reality, there is not reconciliation in the hearts of Rwandans.”

AVP presents a quiet challenge to each participant: rather than looking outside yourself, look within. What have you done? What can you do? After experiencing AVP, there was a distinct shift in where people located the power to reconcile Rwanda: for survivors and perpetrators alike, this power, though still vested in the government, also pushed forward from deep within. “Even if you only train survivors,” said a survivor, a smile tugging at her mouth, “I think then we will be able to help change these released prisoners.”

People who were killed were Tutsi. Those who were killers were Hutu. Those who are survivors are not able to forgive those who killed their families. Hutus who killed felt they could not get forgiveness. In AVP we saw that if you forgive you are helped more than the person you are forgiving. If you forgive, then it is simple for that person to come with his whole family and become fast friends. If you change Tutsis, it is possible to change all those Hutus.

– genocide survivor

One survivor tells a story of attending the funeral of her brother, who was killed during the genocide. With Gacaca and the voicing of new truths, remains are being unearthed in newly discovered mass graves, and last April, the month of genocide commemoration, many of these remains were reburied with appropriate funeral rites. Thus, twelve years after the genocide, not long after participating in AVP, a survivor went home to attend the funeral of her brother. In the past, she didn’t like to go to that village, because his killers were still living there, but when they saw so many friends and family the killers retreated to their own homes:

On the day of the funeral, many survivors and family were around, so the killers were afraid and left, but I went to bring them back to the funeral. I gave them chairs and gave them something to drink. I asked the speaker to recognize those people as our neighbors. After 7 days, they started to tell me things I never knew. Some brought back our things [which had been stolen]. Then, in Gacaca, I was talking about some of our property which had been destroyed, and those killers reminded me of the things I had forgotten, because of the way I listened to them. They were also changed and I got this from the AVP workshop.

– genocide survivor

Two released prisoners tell similar stories of how they initiated connection:

After coming back from prison, I moved into my house and there is a survivor who came and built his house right near me, very close. After building those houses, we had a fence that separated us. We couldn’t talk to each other, because I felt he could do bad things to me. But after AVP, I felt free. I found a passage between our houses. Now I go to ask for fire or water. I asked forgiveness and now I go to his home and we share food and vice versa. Note: To share food in Rwanda is an enormous sign of trust because the fear of being poisoned is rampant.

During these moments I felt free to go and find one man whose son I had killed. I tried to ask for forgiveness. He didn’t directly forgive me, but slowly slowly, he has now forgiven me. Now we are friends. That has helped him to change because he has seen that I’m changed too. I wish to see him take AVP.

Survival

In the absence of sufficient welfare from the government, to survive poverty and widespread unemployment, Rwanda operates on a system of informal mutual aid. If someone has no food for her children, her neighbors will give her milk from their cows. She, in turn, may watch another neighbor’s children, and that neighbor might take in a battered woman. Those who have next to nothing share with those who have nothing. The genocide tore apart these systems of

mutual aid. Survivors have little to no extended family to whom to turn. Prisoners' families are ashamed to ask. Returning prisoners have been isolated for a decade or more. For those who are left, suspicion abounds. Thus, the circles of support are too narrow to be sustainable. A number of interviewees talked about how AVP is beginning to restore these systems of mutual aid, and how this reparation is intertwined with the complicated journey of reconciliation.

For me, before AVP I couldn't visit the neighbors. Now I'm completely changed. Now I visit them. I started visiting them and I called their children to my house, and I gave the children clothes. When the children went back home, their parents were very happy. One promised to come and dig for me in the farm. – genocide widow

Several weeks later, the promise was kept and two men came and helped this lone woman cultivate her land to prepare it for planting. A released prisoner had a similar experience:

I have been very happy [since the workshop]. For example, I couldn't talk to survivors. I used to see them as my enemies. But after attending these workshops, I find them, I talk to them. Where I live, I couldn't ask for water to drink, but now I can ask. Before, I could not ask someone to lend me something, now I can go ask. – released prisoner

Although these are powerful examples, one thing is missing from the released prisoners' testimonies. While many talked about the experience of approaching survivors when before they were afraid, and many talked about asking for things – water, fire, forgiveness – not one prisoner talked about offering their own reparations in the form of labor or material restitution. Thus, this reminds us that the journey is long and far from simple.

Land

Land is a source of great conflict in Nyamata. The government owns the land and citizens can lease it. It is in short supply. Rwanda is the most densely populated country in Africa and the second most densely populated in the world. Nyamata has experienced waves of population shifts. There are the survivors who stayed but occupied Hutu homes. There are the Tutsi refugees that had fled in 1959 and returned after the genocide. There are the Hutu refugees who returned several years later. And now there are waves of prisoners coming home to find their land taken over by others, divided among other family members, or gone to seed. Land and family conflict are also intertwined as small plots of land are divided up within growing families.

One former prisoner talked about how AVP shifted his perspective on a family conflict over land:

My father had two wives and he had just one small piece of land for them. After I went to prison, I remember that the second wife went to a refugee camp. After I was released, my brothers and I decided not to allow this woman and her children to come back to the land because our mother was the first wife. When that second wife came back, we tried to chase her away. We told her, 'You have no place here. You have to go.' But after AVP, I went to find that second wife and we have found a place for her and divided the land between us peacefully. – released prisoner

Truth

Rwanda's genocide survivors are prepared to pay a high price for the truth. They have released tens of thousands of perpetrators from prison in hopes of hearing the truth. They cut prison sentences in half in exchange for the truth. They will live next to killers, if only they will tell them how they killed, where they killed, and who they killed.

One of the primary forums for truth is Gacaca, the traditional courts revived to handle thousands of cases of genocide. Several released prisoners reflected on



the shift that they saw in survivors after these survivors had attended AVP:

It is true. People felt fear. Because they had not met together. During Gacaca, the released prisoners testify to what they've done or seen. Some survivors were saying, no, they're not telling the truth and wanted them to go back to prison, and that caused a lot of fear.

What I realized is that survivors and released prisoners who attended the workshop, we made a difference in Gacaca. Because there were people who said we want this and this. People can come to tell the truth but other can say, no, you are lying, because he's not saying what they want him to say, and then he's put back in prison. We who have attended AVP have influenced things. Since AVP, especially survivors who attended, when they say these ones must go to prison, they say no, wait, let's try to understand. We don't know, we didn't see. They helped the judges to listen well to witnesses, to go systematically, not allowing people to say what they don't know or didn't see themselves.

Survivors also found that if they show compassion they are more likely to hear the truth:

I don't see change with everyone, but I do see change with those with whom I've

spoken. We have shown them [released prisoners] that this was because of bad politics, because before we were neighbors and friends. Then they started telling things they hadn't shared before. We told them that it was not them, but bad leaders. Though they've committed a lot of sins, they can change. But now, when they see that we're not out for revenge, they can tell us more about how they did the killings.

– genocide survivor

Conclusion

“To sit together in a room with those who killed your family, it is not easy,” says Pastor David Bucura, former coordinator for AVP-Rwanda. “To forgive, it is not an easy thing. You see? But we try, we try.” In Nyamata, AVP is leaving its mark. People are looking within and stumble upon their own profound power to heal their community. Slowly, slowly, Nyamata’s circles of aid are widening, as survivors and prisoners find what they have to give and summon the courage to ask for what they need. Little by little, truth is leaking out – a searing balm, both craved and feared. And so the people come, those who have lost and those who have stolen, those who have survived and those who have killed. And when they see that in the workshop they will have to sit with the enemy, almost no one walks away. They haven’t walked away. From outside, no one can believe it. But from here, where tragedy has edged sadness into every face, where the red hills are soaked with blood, there is a hunger, a thirst, to simply be, in the words of one survivor, “together again like before.”

The African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI) of the Friends Peace Teams strengthens, supports, and promotes peace activities at the grassroots level in the Great Lakes region of Africa (Burundi, Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda). To this end, AGLI responds to requests from local religious and non-governmental organizations that focus on conflict management, peace building, trauma healing, and reconciliation. AGLI sponsors Peace Teams composed of members from local partners and the international community.

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